The art film, affect and the female viewer: *The Piano* revisited

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Every so often a film appears that has the ability to mesmerize its spectators, taking up sustained residence in their imaginations and emotions. A dozen years ago that film, at least for some female viewers, was Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993). In her 1995 essay in *Screen*, Sue Gillett testified to the film's strange magic when she wrote that, '*The Piano* affected me very deeply. I was entranced, moved, dazed. I held my breath. I was reluctant to re-enter the everyday world after the film had finished. *The Piano* shook, disturbed, and inhabited me. I felt that my own dreams had taken form, been revealed. I dreamed of Ada the night after I saw the film. These were thick, heavy and exhilarating feelings'.[1] In a more material instance of the film's affective impact, Laleen Jayamanne reported that, to her astonishment, she acquired an inexplicable pain in a finger of her left hand in apparent sympathy with the suffering caused Ada, the film's protagonist, when her index finger is severed by her axe-wielding husband in a fit of rage.[2] Although there are undoubtedly viewers who were unmoved by *The Piano*, like Gillette and Jayamanne, others have found the film visually ravishing, provocatively perplexing and otherwise compelling.[3]

The film's public heyday is over, but far from losing its purchase on viewers, *The Piano* lives on through video and DVD reissue. The passage of time and repeated viewing may dispel a film's interest for fans, but multiple returns to a favourite text can also enhance its original effects, enabling spectators to meditate further on its allure, as well as their own responses. Indeed, such returns are often strongly motivated by a desire to recapture and to understand the emotions the film initially elicited.

1 Sue Gillett, 'Lips and fingers: Jane Campion's *The Piano*', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1995), p. 286. See also Gillett's *Views from Beyond the Mirror: The Films of Jane Campion* (St Kilda, Australia: Australian Teachers of Media, 2004), where she continues to develop the importance of the personal to textual reading and response.

2 Laleen Jayamanne, *Toward Cinema and its Double: Cross-Cultural Mimesis* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 48.

3 For more commentary from female critics on *The Piano* when it first appeared, see: Stella Bruzzi, 'Tempestuous petticoats: costume and desire in *The Piano*', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1995), pp. 257–66; and Lynda Dyson, 'The return of the repressed? Whiteness, femininity, and colonialism in *The Piano*', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1995), pp. 267–76. See also Suzy Gordon, ' 'I clipped your wing, that's all': auto-eroticism and the female spectator in *The Piano* debate', *Screen*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1996), pp. 193–205. Such work as Gillett's *Views from Beyond the Mirror* and Vivian Sobchack's

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With the durability of a film's impact in mind, I argue that the fascination *The Piano* has exercised for viewers is suggestive for a study of the art film's affective dimensions. Like more mainstream fare, art cinema is clearly capable of arousing strong emotions.[4] Yet the genre has attracted little attention in reception or audience studies, save for periodic analyses of film reviews that examine how international films are received in US markets.[5] Scholars interested in audiences have been drawn instead to popular cultural texts, especially Hollywood films and television series. Such texts leave large discursive footprints in their wake, resulting in bountiful commentary to examine. Further, a blockbuster such as *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) or a cult phenomenon such as the Star Trek franchise plays a role in fans' everyday lives, giving these texts a prominent place in cultural experience that justifies their importance for study. Since the art film often circulates in marginal exhibition venues and attracts a relatively small viewership, it lacks the mainstream text's cultural currency. Moreover, the niche group most often associated with the art film – the educated elite – has rarely been of interest to theorists and critics focused on redeeming the mass cultural viewer from the spectre of the Frankfurt School's undifferentiated, passive consumer. At the same time, as art film critics concentrate on defining the historical contexts, directors and aesthetic strategies involved in specific films or film movements, spectatorship is often at best a secondary consideration.

Because of the tacit assumption that the genre's textual complexities, coupled with its constrained cultural circulation and elite audience, circumscribe questions of response, the art film viewer has fallen between the cracks of film scholarship. We can begin to reconsider this state of affairs by acknowledging that art films and their spectators are not somehow isolated from the hubbub of mass culture. Art cinema is seldom free from affiliations with more popular genres, as the French New Wave or New German Cinema movements, with their ambivalent relation to Hollywood films, attest.[6] *The Piano* itself is a hybrid – part art film, part Gothic melodrama. Further, although art films and their discursive environments may cultivate certain kinds of responses and attract educated audiences, the individual viewer is a reservoir of past textual encounters that cut across aesthetic boundaries, any of which can be activated in the process of viewing. It is unlikely, then, that responses to art films line up neatly according to the customary divide between high and low culture, between modernist and popular texts. The question of the art film viewer's response thus involves reckoning both with the intertextual, boundary-crossing nature of films in the genre and the viewing modalities that encounter them.

Rather than mount a full-scale interpretation of the Campion film to reflect upon its hold over viewers, I address one of the major currencies of the art film in general and *The Piano* in particular: the spectacular, enigmatic and captivating image. Surely the heated responses *The Piano* has elicited are linked to the noted evocativeness of Campion's imagery?

Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 53–84 provide examples of the film's continuing ability to produce testimonials and provoke debate.

4 Charles Affron analyses art films and other genres to understand how emotion is aroused in *Cinema and Sentiment* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982). He notes that art films engage in an overt sentimentality usually associated with Hollywood films, including 'tear-jerkers', thus indicating the proximity between art and Hollywood cinema in this regard.

5 Work on art cinema and the institution of reviewing includes Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) and Mike Budd, 'The moments of *Caligari*', in Mike Budd (ed.), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: Texts, Contexts, Histories* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 7–119.

6 Joan Hawkins', *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), a study of the interrelationships between horror films and art cinema, shows the difficulty of maintaining traditional distinctions between low and high culture in cinema, distinctions often erroneously sustained through assumptions that low culture delivers affect viscerally, while high culture invokes a more distanced and refined response.

I wish to focus on the evocative image as a site of lingering affective power and uncertain meaning. If, as Godard suggests of all cinema (in his eight-part series *Histoire(s) du Cinema* [1988–1998]), we do not remember story details as much as certain scenes and objects, then we might explore in detail the role that memorable cinematic fragments play in reception – especially in films defined extensively by the strength, as well as the ambiguity, of their images. Granting that there is something elusive about the images viewers find most compelling – in Roland Barthes' formulation, a 'third meaning' that resonates with an excess of signification – the art film allows us to investigate the imagistic basis of film response and recollection in a genre known for its ability to conjure memorable visuals.[7]

As Robert Ray argues, a study of film that does not 'mobilize cinematic details as *evidence* of larger arguments', but regards 'movie scenes as *clues* to unpredictable knowledge', invites interpretations based less on the certainties of traditional exegesis and more on tracing the associations provoked by the cinematic moments that haunt us.[8] Studying the associative dimensions of viewing provides an alternative means of comprehending the film experience. Along these lines, scholars such as Annette Kuhn have discussed the importance of association, emotion and memory to the ways in which viewers process films, insisting that cinema has a profound sensory dimension that stirs recollections of other events, other selves, even of other films. Kuhn has called for cultural theory to include the viewer's experience – not as a 'trump card of authenticity', but to recognize the place of experience in film analysis and its vital connection to 'wider, more public, histories'.[9] If we acknowledge that any individual response is a composite of intertextual and social dynamics, analysing the personal becomes a matter of tracking the cultural forces at work in the encounter between film and viewer.

Foregrounding the primacy of the inscrutable visual and the inevitable associative processes at work in reception, I examine *The Piano*'s closing scene, in which Ada imagines herself moored to her piano at the bottom of the sea. By reflecting on this scene, I hope to explore the relationship between cinematic visuals and affective responses negotiated through the viewer's past experiences. Ultimately, this consideration may help us to understand the specific appeal of *The Piano* as a cult film for so many women.

Toward the end of *The Piano*, Ada's repressive husband Stewart lets her leave with Baines, a worker on his estate with whom she has been having an unconventional affair. With Maoris to bring her beloved piano to shore and to man the boat, Ada, Baines and her daughter Flora set off for their new life together. During the voyage, Ada unexpectedly demands that the piano be thrown overboard. Initially reluctant to do so because he knows how much the instrument has meant to Ada, Baines is finally persuaded, and the rope tying the piano to the boat is undone.

7 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 52–68.

8 Robert Ray, 'Scenes as clues', (anthology prospectus, unpublished manuscript). My study is inspired by Ray's deployment of Roland Barthes and other theorists to argue for an interpretive mode that analyses movie experiences by exploring the meaning of elusive and compelling cinematic details. For more on this, see Ray's *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), especially pp. 1–14.

9 Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (New York, NY: Verso, 1995), pp. 28, 39. See also her *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2002). As my article was going through final revisions, I was also made aware of a relevant source by a different author – Victor Burgin's *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004). Burgin discusses the significance of the film fragment and involuntary associations – including personal memory, dreams and connections with other films – to the contemporary study of cinema, especially given the impact of video and other similar developments on film viewing.

As the Maoris heave the instrument overboard, Ada slips her ankle into the rope, going over the edge with it, but as she sinks to the bottom of the sea, she resolves not to drown, struggles successfully to be free of the rope, and ascends, rescued from her previous impulses.

The momentousness of Ada's choices is conveyed by the number of dramatic reversals the scene involves. Ada sacrifices the piano she has adamantly insisted upon having throughout the film, just at the moment when she achieves a change in circumstances that would allow her unbounded access to it. She then impulsively decides to sacrifice herself along with it, only to save herself in the last instant. Michael Nyman's plaintive score and the slow-motion underwater cinematography stress the suspense and gravity of Ada's decision to 'choose life'. Further, in the sea's liminal space, as she leaves behind Stewart's unyielding patriarchal ways and approaches life with a man associated with the Maoris' less oppressive ways, she sunders her relationship with the piano – the one thing that gave her the power of expression in patriarchal and colonialist contexts. As she severs her ties to this archetype of Western culture, she appears to cast off the rituals that have long regulated her life. Her rejection of the piano signifies the refusal of the contexts that necessitated her retreat to this oasis of expression, particularly those that created and sustained her self-imposed exile into a rebellious state of muteness. As the piano goes over the boat's edge, it literally represents the weight of the past and its ability to drag Ada to her death. At this moment, Ada elects to explore a life less stringently regulated by the Victorian era's stark gender inequities.

Following this pivotal scene, the film appears to move toward a tranquil resolution. Now living in Nelson with Baines and her daughter, Ada is teaching piano. Through a prosthesis Baines fashioned to replace the fingertip severed by Stewart's axe, she is able to play again. She is also slowly learning to speak again. Although she works to regain her speech within a renovated family and social structure, her complete enculturation is indefinitely postponed. Because of her prosthesis, she is considered the 'town freak'. Baines is similarly an outsider; not only is he married to someone else, but his Maori markings continue to define him as Other in a white context. By her choice of partner and by her appearance, Ada thus manages to maintain a fringe identity within society, avoiding the complete assimilation that often characterizes closure in more conventional cinematic fare.

However, as the film's last shot vividly demonstrates, the narrative will not rest with this modestly qualified happy end. An image invoking the earlier overboard scene performs the film's final reversal. Ada has not left the past entirely behind after all; she still entertains the thought of her own death, visualized as a combination of a dream, a wish and a haunting. Through her internal voice, Ada discusses how at night she thinks about the fate she almost encountered. She imagines her piano in its ocean grave and sees herself tethered to it, as she once was, by an ankle caught in a rope. In her mind's eye, the piano sits at the bottom of

the sea, surrounded by plants and fish. This moment is presented through a single shot as the camera tracks back from the piano, losing her figure in the ocean's murkiness until the screen fades to black and the credits roll (figures 1–4). As the camera withdraws, Ada explains that, 'Down there everything is so still and silent that it allows me to sleep. It is a weird lullaby and so it is – it is mine'. Quoting from English poet Thomas Hood, Ada utters the closing words of *The Piano*: 'There is a silence where hath been no sound. There is a silence where no sound hath been, in the cold grave under the deep, deep sea'.

Figures 1–4
'There is a silence where no sound hath been. . .' *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993).

Clearly, the piano is still a force with which to contend, but the viewer is not sure how to interpret its surprise return and the accompanying depiction of Ada's other possible fate. This epilogue is, then, especially moving and provocative: its visual and aural presentation impart a compelling lyrical quality, while its unexpected and inexplicable representation of Ada's death, portrayed with some longing, create an enigma. Indeed, the mysteries of the interpretive and affective dimensions of this image have become a mainstay of my viewing of *The Piano*, from my first encounter with the film through each subsequent screening.

To begin to comprehend the impact of this closing shot, we can consider it as presenting a particularly rich example of cinematic imagery – what I shall call an 'arresting image'. Epitomizing the visual expressiveness usually associated with art films, the arresting image is a signature element of the genre. It occurs when a film stops to contemplate an exquisitely composed, significantly evocative and/or uncanny image. The forward motion of the narrative slows down or temporarily halts, allowing this spectacle to capture fully our attention. The arresting image may have an additionally unusual temporal status, often appearing outside of time in a fantasy or dream-like dimension. As it crystallizes the art film's expressiveness through striking visuals rendered in an impeded or otherwise altered time frame, this kind of imagery also embodies the genre's expected complexity and ambiguity.[10] The exact meaning of the arresting image is unclear; it is at once visually stirring and interpretively opaque. The mystifying qualities of the arresting image are, in turn, deeply related to its affective dimension. Its ability to stoke emotions in the audience that have been building through the film is part of its peculiar allure. However, although it serves as a focal point for emotions, this image does not typically provide sure resolution or catharsis. Just as it forestalls easy interpretation, its emotional effects are both intricate and obscure. We can consider the arresting image, then, as the 'money shot' of the art film insofar as it delivers a payoff for one of the genre's chief expected pleasures: contact with highly aestheticized, ambiguous and affecting imagery.

As a generic convention that foregrounds certain aspects of the art film's style and affect, the spectacular visual provides useful insight into the relationship between art films and their viewers. Like all images, arresting images can activate a web of associations in the viewer that indicates the pervasive role of intertextuality in response. By intertextuality I mean not only the texts, genres or media that an art film may refer to or invoke, but also those connections forged from the viewer's personal and cultural experiences. During the process of viewing, the text ignites associations – some of which it may have calculated, others of which are unpredictable and dependent upon the spectator's storehouse of images. Watching a film or other media text

10 David Bordwell, 'The art cinema as a mode of film practice', in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 774–82. Bordwell defines art cinema against the classical Hollywood norm, calling attention to the former's stylistic excess and inherent ambiguity.

inevitably brings into play innumerable variables drawn from such intertextual zones.

In *Lost in a Book*, Victor Nell invokes the familiar analogy of a pebble striking a pond to describe the complexities of response in reading, particularly how comprehension occurs. Nell argues that comprehension is often misunderstood as referring to the text's central point, when it really concerns the 'great rapidity of associative processes' set off during the text's decoding. Describing comprehension as a 'set of concentric circles', he argues that,

> After the first ripple taps the listener's episodic memory... each successive ripple draw[s] on a wider circle of idiosyncratic associations dislodged from the listener's autobiography. Each individual comprehension is an associative and therefore memory-enriched process; the enrichment derives from autobiographical... memory rather than from verifiable semantic memory.[11]

In other words, the role of autobiography during reading outweighs the power of language to control and shape the reader's thoughts.

When considering an audio-visual medium like film, the ripple effect is of course generated by a mode of representation different from literature. More substantively, although Nell's concept of this effect contributes to a revamped notion of comprehension, there is reason to qualify another aspect of his argument: that associations produced during this process are completely idiosyncratic. An individual's personal experience may indeed generate a unique set of associations in a textual encounter, but each ripple itself has discursive roots. Associations are drawn from discursive territories that traverse the text, the viewer, and their relationship. The ripple effect must be understood, then, as a highly mediated response influenced by social, cultural and ideological contexts.

Given its evocativeness and ambiguity, the art film's arresting image has perhaps a special status in relation to associative processes. Such images are evocative precisely because, along with their visual and aural richness, they have a persistent element of inscrutability. The solution to their interpretive and affective mysteries cannot be found solely within textual precincts, recoverable from sound exegesis. It is located in the vast, unruly intertextual network represented, at the very least, by the viewer's own backlog of visual experience. To comprehend the riddle of the affective force of the arresting image, then, it is necessary to perform a mini-archaeology of the associations it invokes. By tracking associations – not only those that the text prompts, but those that are unforeseen or appear quirky – we can begin to grasp the elusive nature of our enjoyment when confronted with an intensely engaging image.

To consider both the arresting image and the ripple effect in more detail, I return to my own fascination with the underwater denouement of

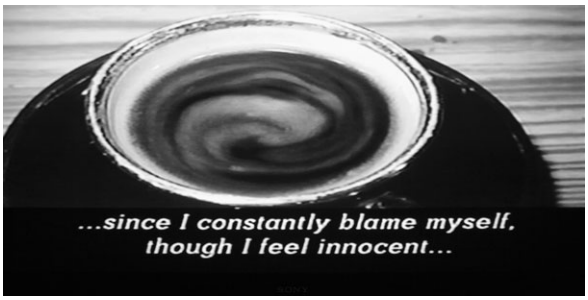
11 Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 77, 78, 80. Nell, however, subscribes to the notion that the reader's imagination is freer to roam when reading popular fiction than it is when encountering difficult, modernist texts. He thus unnecessarily delimits the ripple effect by supporting the typical dichotomy between low and high cultural texts.

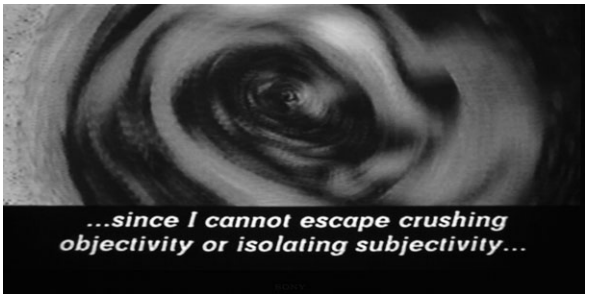
The Piano. Although this sequence doubtless elicits myriad visual links, three associations in particular have arisen automatically and involuntarily during my viewings. Two derive explicitly from past films, specifically Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1966) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940), while the last comes from a recurrent childhood dream I had after watching *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) on television. Until now, I have simply let these associations flit by without reflection or examination, thinking them inconsequential, not to mention wildly incongruous. Upon inspecting them more closely, however, I found surprising symmetries across a number of levels, from the formal to the ideological, symmetries that create connections across otherwise very different kinds of texts. Ultimately, these connections help to clarify the interpretive and affective dimensions of *The Piano*'s final vision of a woman tethered to a piano at the bottom of the sea. At the same time, they shed light on a significant aspect of spectatorship, in which the text catalyses digressions into the viewer's personal archives, in the process fracturing textual unity and remaking the text through the cultural pressures that underwrite individual response.

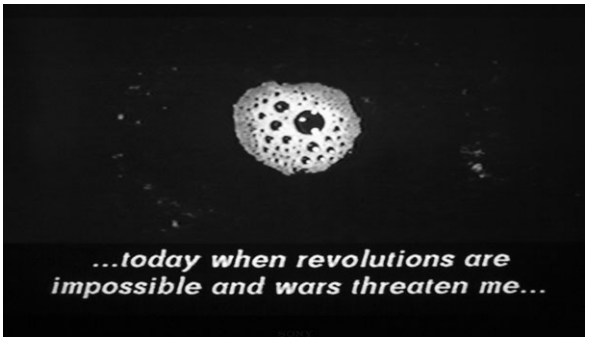
For me, *The Piano*'s closure vividly invokes a scene from Godard's film that presents a stellar – perhaps *the* stellar – example of an arresting image. Interspersed between shots of characters in a cafe, there is a series of increasingly closely framed shots of a cup of espresso. As the sounds from the cafe are temporarily muted, a nondiegetic narrator (Godard himself) muses about philosophical issues concerning language, identity, community, class and politics, leaving us to contemplate how these issues relate to the cup's dark interior.

Although this meditation interrupts the narrative, the narrative just as surely disrupts it: a woman looks at a magazine filled with pictures of women used to advertise various products; the proprietor makes another espresso; Juliette, a housewife and part-time prostitute, stares at a man; the man in turn smokes and reads a newspaper. When the camera cuts away from these characters, it immerses us in a universe captured in the small circle of the demitasse with its agitated bubbles. This universe, with its combination of whispered metaphysics, impeded, abstract time and extreme close-ups in widescreen, transforms a simple demitasse that would otherwise be lost within the banalities of cafe life into an unexpectedly lyrical and elegant landscape worthy of our reverie (figures 5–7).

In its mingling of reflective voiceover, a sense of time standing still outside of the narrative flow, and a poetic, mystifying image, this sequence from *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* bears a resemblance to *The Piano*'s closing shot, forging a relationship between quite distinct art films. These films were produced during different historical eras by directors, one a man, the other a woman, working within the framework of different styles, film movements and national







Figures 5–7
The demitasse transformed: an unexpectedly lyrical and elegant landscape. *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1966).

contexts. Yet, the films deploy the generic convention of the arresting image in formally similar ways. The major difference lies in Godard's willingness, inspired by Brechtian aesthetics, to disturb the spectator's rapport with this image by continually cutting back to the cafe's denizens. The fact that the espresso cup's aural and visual presentation still manages to captivate testifies to the potency, even seductiveness, of this form of heightened, contemplative, cinematic expression.

While these moments from the Godard and Campion films have generic affinities, it is important to point out that arresting images are not the sole province of certain national art cinemas. They can be readily found in an array of other media forms, including avant-garde works, television, photography, commercial films, reality videos and advertisements. The desire to produce a transfixing image is, in a sense,

the Holy Grail of media culture. When the great ship in *Titanic* is perpendicular to the water's surface and poised to go under, we see one example of how central awe-inspiring visuals are to contemporary image-making, particularly when they are achieved through special effects. In this case, such visuals showcase the filmmaker's brilliance and the industry's economic power, just as they help to crystallize the ultimate affective ambitions of the disaster film. In *Titanic*, the essential moment of disaster – the ship's sinking – is cinematically spectacular and highly emotional, filling the audience with amazement and dread.

Unlike most arresting images in art films, however, this kind of Hollywood spectacle has immediate legibility. As in many Hollywood films, the indelible image does not wish to be truly mysterious; rather, it represents the culmination of the film's narrative trajectory and emotional structure. Thus, one distinction between arresting images in blockbusters and in art films lies in the former's repudiation of ambiguity. In this sense, these contrasting uses of arresting images subscribe to the traditional opposition between Hollywood and art cinemas. As scholars such as Peter Wollen and David Bordwell have argued, the classic form strives for transparency, while the modernist form pursues stylistic and narrative complexity and ambiguity.[12]

Acknowledging this difference, I do not offer it as the basis of an aesthetic judgment – that art films are somehow better than blockbusters because of their interest in ambiguous imagery. Indeed, art cinema is as invested in manipulating and commodifying the arresting image as any other type of film. More importantly, there is ultimately little use in pursuing sharp distinctions between films with arresting images, given the cross-pollination that characterizes media today. We should instead regard the arresting image's characteristics and impact as variably realized across multiple film genres and between films in those genres. No matter where it appears, though, the arresting image functions to signify artfulness through a self-conscious display of a moment of strange beauty, reminding viewers that films are, after all, composed of images.

Films that aspire towards artfulness within the context of recognized Hollywood genres often predominently feature arresting images to demonstrate their special boundary-crossing status. In fact, the arresting image is a mobile signifier that helps give this kind of cinema its 'art film' credentials. Certainly, David Lynch's oeuvre comes to mind here. A director who has built his reputation on an ability to conjure up freaky visions, Lynch's films may represent a case of the excessive production of arresting images. One has only to think of the visage and shock-therapy hairstyle of the main character in Lynch's independent horror film *Eraserhead* (1978) or the dead man standing in the murder scene in small-town noir *Blue Velvet* (1986) (figures 8 and 9) to begin to enumerate the provocative and memorable images his work has

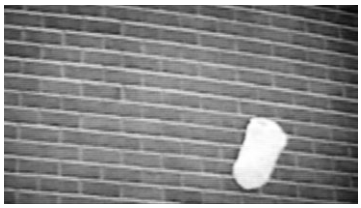
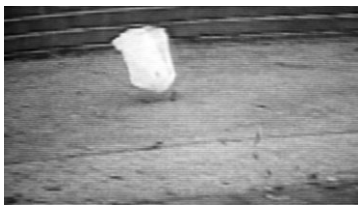
12 Peter Wollen, 'Godard and counter-cinema: *Vent d'Est*', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, V. II* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 500–509; Bordwell, 'The art cinema as a mode of film practice'.

Figures 8 and 9
Murder victims Don Vallens (Dick Green) and the Yellow Man/Detective T.R. Gordon (Fred Pickler). *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986).

Figures 10 and 11
Travis Bickle (Robert de Niro), Iris Steensma (Jody Foster), and police officers in the aftermath of Bickle's climactic shooting spree. *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorcese, 1976).

generated, as well as to see how easily arresting images traverse different filmmaking modes and genres.

Moreover, such moments are showstoppers: the image's bizarre and baffling nature freezes the narrative flow momentarily as characters seek to understand what they see. In this vein, other films portray arresting images through cinematic means that more overtly slow or stop the action. Toward the end of Martin Scorsese's urban noir *Taxi Driver* (1976), for instance, Travis Bickle commits a mass murder in a brothel. After he concludes his rampage, a lingering high-angle shot transposes the frenetic whirl of carnage into a tableau, a still life that amplifies the rampage's horrors by immobilizing its content and providing a morbid bird's-eye view of its aftermath (figures 10 and 11). Director John Woo's routine use of slow motion in his films to compose highly aesthetic images is considered a signature element of his hard-boiled cop films. In *Face/Off* (1997), for example, Woo depicts a child listening on earphones to Judy Garland's song of utopian yearning from *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', in the midst of a firefight between drug lords and the police. Like many other directors seeking to produce arresting images, Woo orchestrates their impact by juxtaposing incongruous elements. Such incongruities often engender transformative effects, where characters, actions and objects are rewritten into unexpected contexts of meaning. Thus, in the family melodrama *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), the prosaic image of a plastic bag blowing in the street, captured on home video, metamorphoses into a signifier of grace and wonder, as the film slows down to let characters and the audience marvel at this object's new perceptual status (figures 12 and 13). The fact that this scene was inspired by a similar moment in Nathan Dorsky's *Variations* (1992–8), an avant-garde experiment with montage featuring a procession of

Figures 12 and 13
The balletic plastic bag, appearing in a home video. *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999).

dreamlike visuals, continues to underscore the networking that occurs between different modes of cinema at the level of imagery.

These examples, then, clarify several other aspects of the arresting image as convention. We have already seen that this image exemplifies the visual expressiveness expected of art films and that it appears as a moment of intense contemplation, frequently through a distension or immobilization of time that counters the narrative flow. Further, the image often crystallizes a film's enigmatic emotional and thematic resonances, conveying a sense of lyricism or depth of meaning. Scenes from the films above confirm that the arresting image operates additionally to indicate the presence of the director's hand. The image radiates intentionality, an especially self-conscious intervention of the filmmaker's stylistic signature into the world he or she has created. We can also see more clearly that arresting images are often generated by juxtaposing incongruous elements (for example, *Face/Off*'s innocent listening to Garland against a backdrop of violent action) or by changing an object's status, especially when this change converts the everyday into the sublime (for example, *Two or Three Things*' demitasse and *American Beauty*'s plastic bag).

To a certain extent, these incongruities and transformations recall a surrealist aesthetic. Indeed, Campion's work has been associated with surrealism, an influence unmistakable in *The Piano*'s final scene with its eerie combination of submerged woman and piano – a distant relative, perhaps, of the scene from *Un Chien Andalou* (Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel, 1928) in which a man drags a piano draped with donkey carcasses across an apartment floor. With its dream-like, unexpected juxtapositions and transfigurations of objects, the arresting image defamiliarizes its contents in surprising, sometimes shocking ways. Yet, this association between contemporary art films and surrealism is unstable. Art cinema often strives to maximize the exotic beauty of such images to amplify their aesthetic status. This aim contrasts with the more radical surrealist formulations interested in defying the sense of the sublime associated with art so as to outrage middlebrow audiences. The art film's arresting image delivers the kind of experience such audiences expect from a form that tries to rise above mass culture: it exposes them to an intense perceptual moment not immediately comprehensible in terms of narrative function or theme, yet oddly touching or emotionally compelling. Indeed, art cinema 'astonishes the bourgeoisie'[13] with highly

13 Director Billy Wilder, quoted in his obituary on the subject of flashy cinematic style, 'Billy Wilder, caustic filmmaker with slashing wit and stinging satire, dies', *New York Times*, 29 March 2002, Section A, p. 21.

stylized visual feats and ambiguous, provocative meanings, meant to define its directors, films and viewers as exceptional, as existing outside of mass culture's ordinary fray.

As further testimony to the fact that arresting images cross a spectrum of genres and texts, my second association with *The Piano*'s final scene hails from Hollywood, specifically 'quality' studio filmmaking. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock and produced by David O. Selznick as a prestige adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's novel by the same name, *Rebecca* is a hybrid, designed as an artful woman's film. Like *The Piano*, *Rebecca* belongs to a particular subspecies of the woman's film, namely the Gothic melodrama. In the Gothic's formula, a relatively powerless woman enters an alien domain where she is subject to her husband's will or that of another man; Ada and the heroine of *Rebecca* travel, respectively, to a New Zealand outpost and a British mansion to begin new lives with men who are essentially unknown to them. The woman struggles with questions of identity until she discovers the passion that has been lurking all along in the heart of her true love, a man previously characterized by cold or suspicious behaviour. There are variations, but closure in the typical Gothic melodrama finds both heroine and hero redeemed. As the female protagonist discovers the truth about her intended, she establishes a more self-assured identity, less compromised by fear and subjection. Conversely, once freed from constraints that have prevented him from relieving the heroine's oppressive emotional and physical state, the hero is shown to be a loyal, loving partner.

Rebecca commences at the end of this chain of events. After the film's opening credits, the heroine recounts a dream she has had concerning her previous place of residence: her husband Maxim de Winter's family estate, Manderley. This narration and its dream imagery serve as a prelude to a flashback that will constitute the rest of the film. The heroine, who remains nameless throughout *Rebecca*, begins, 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again'. In this fantasy return, she describes her spirit-like movement through the gates and down the path to the mansion. The estate has been overtaken by the 'long tenacious fingers' of nature, which has come into its own again. Even so, nothing could 'mar the perfect symmetry of those walls' of the now 'secretive and silent' Manderley. Although its windows are temporarily animated by moonlight, giving the appearance of life, we learn that fire has decimated the building. As the narrator says, it is now nothing more than a 'desolate shell'. She concludes, 'We can never go back to Manderley again', but she does return in her dreams and thinks about how her past has led to her present.

Like the associative link to *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, the connection between *The Piano* and this scene arises partially from *Rebecca*'s specific articulation of the arresting image, that is, from a series of formal symmetries. Manderley appears outside of narrative time in the 'frozen' space of dream contemplation. Against a cloudy, moonlit

sky and a misty landscape, the scene offers us the ghost of Manderley. By extension, it also offers us the ghost of its former mistress, Rebecca, who materializes only in relation to her absent-presence in the film's mise-en-scene. Existing in an oneiric space and time, the once baronial setting, overtaken by nature and decay, becomes a transfixing image (figures 14 and 15).

These scenes also share a certain sound design that helps to enhance their associations, as well as their ability to captivate. Both *The Piano* and *Rebecca* use female voiceovers.[14] Whether male or female, though, the voiceovers in the Campion, Godard and Hitchcock films are internal, coming from the narrator's subjectivity. Combined with the delicate quality of each voice, the narration's subjective status promotes the sensation that the viewer is being taken into the narrator's confidence. Ada's lilting, diminutive expressions, the whispered intonations of Godard's philosopher, and the soft, refined diction of *Rebecca*'s unnamed heroine draw part of their affective power from the intimacy and vulnerability conveyed through the grain of their voices. In such cases, as Barthes observes, listening pleasure arises not from the voice's sheer ability to communicate, but from the materiality of the language, a certain 'voluptuousness of its sound-signifiers'.[15] Heightening this effect, at least for a US viewer, the narrators speak either with an accent or in a foreign tongue, distinguishing their voices as more exotic than those

14 Kathleen McHugh discusses female narrators as central to the moral complexity of Campion's films in, '"Sounds that creep inside you": female narration and voice-over in the films of Jane Campion', *Style*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2001), pp. 193–218. Also, in *Cinema and Sentiment* (pp. 104–31), Affron examines the relationship between voice and pathos. Analysing *Johnny Belinda* (Jean Negulesco, 1948), a film about a woman who is a deaf-mute, he argues that the interplay of silence and sound results in a mutual dramatization that makes the sound track particularly effective emotionally.

15 Roland Barthes, 'The grain of the voice', trans. Stephen Heath, in *Image, Music, Text* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977), p. 182.

Figures 14 and 15
Overtaken by nature: Manderley in the frozen space of dream contemplation. *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940).

involved in everyday discourse. As their vocal qualities transcend quotidian communication with its purposeful exchange of information, the narrators' musings gain a privileged perceptual status that lends emotional force to the charged images accompanying them. In the Godard and Campion scenes, the absence or belated entry of film music – the typical signifier of film emotion – allows each voice to command the sound track and to exercise its peculiar trance-like effects with special vividness. Without the voiceovers, the eerie beauty of these images could not achieve the intimate bonds with the viewer so necessary for their full impact.

Narrative and thematic symmetries explain further why these three films might have materialized as associations for me. *Rebecca*'s central mystery involves the title character's fate. At the story's outset Maxim de Winter's first wife is already dead; we are told that she drowned at sea, dragged down into its depths by a sinking ship. The intrigue surrounding her demise revolves around the question of whether her death was an accident, a suicide or a murder at her husband's hands. As it turns out, Rebecca, willful and promiscuous, was dying of cancer and baited Maxim with claims that she was pregnant by another man, hoping that Maxim would kill her and be charged with murder. In the film version, unlike the novel (where Maxim does indeed kill his first wife), an accidental fall against some ship's tackle ends Rebecca's life; Maxim is guilty of nothing more than a cover-up. With the facts revealed about Rebecca's medical condition, the inquest rules her death a suicide. Maxim and his second wife are thus spared further emotional and legal obstructions to their union. Until the revelation about Rebecca's horrific nature, the second Mrs de Winter had mistakenly thought that Maxim still loved Rebecca. No longer intimidated by the spectacle of female perfection Rebecca's legend had represented, she assumes her rightful place as Maxim's wife. The last vestige of Rebecca's identity is destroyed when Mrs Danvers, the housekeeper, sets fire to Manderley in a rage. Except for the dream, the past is dead.

Obviously, both *Rebecca* and *The Piano* present watery graves for female characters pulled under by a vessel of some sort. Further, the sea provides a crucible for determining female identity. As Tania Modleski has argued, Gothic melodramas present an extreme drama of female identity that ultimately has a therapeutic dimension.[16] The Gothic replicates certain conditions of marriage, emphasizing the psychological variables involved, particularly paranoia. In each film, the female character leaves home to enter a strange new world dominated by a male figure who possesses economic and symbolic power as patriarch and lord of the mansion. This situation forces a crisis in identity for the heroine, which is typically resolved by her attaining a more mature, albeit normative, status as a happily married woman cared for by a man who recognizes her worth. Certainly, by the end of *Rebecca*, the nameless one has been reconciled to both patriarchy and class privilege as she becomes the true wife of her wealthy, rather imperious husband. As we have seen,

16 Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 59–84.

The Piano's dual and dueling endings provide a complicated variation on this convention: Ada appears initially to be free from the most onerous forms of colonial and patriarchal domination while holding on to a non-normative identity; yet the imaginary return to her underwater corpse troubles the happy end, closing the film on a profoundly ambiguous note.

Whatever the nature of closure, each film presents the complex conditions under which women struggle to gain self-awareness. This focus on problems of female identity also defines *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, which can be considered a woman's film insofar as it depicts the plight of women within consumer capitalism. Juliette is both a housewife and a prostitute, thus embodying the two female stereotypes demanded by this social system. As mother and whore, Juliette simultaneously upholds the family structure upon which this system relies and participates in the commodity culture built on the exploitation of female sexuality.

Although each film stages a crisis in female identity, none addresses this crisis in unproblematic terms. The politics of each film are imperfect, delivering what we might regard as a flawed feminism. As Laura Mulvey and Colin MacCabe have noted, Godard's representation of women is riddled with contradictory impulses.[17] Like many of his films, in the process of revealing how capitalism exploits women and eroticizes their image to sell consumer goods, *Two or Three Things* ultimately essentializes women as personifications of sexuality. *Rebecca* resolves its painful portrait of the psychic place of women in marriage moralistically by demonizing the titular character's independence as a threat to patriarchy and rewarding the second wife's meekness and obedience. As for *The Piano*, Campion uses the nineteenth-century outpost setting to depict the domination of women and people of color by white male landowners, mounting an ambitious critique of colonialism, patriarchy and Victorian morality. Yet, as the film proceeds, it positions the Maoris on the side of nature, emphasizing their sexuality as well as their primitive and childlike behaviour (as, for example, when they attack a theatre stage during a play, mistaking the drama's illusions for reality). Some critics have thus accused Campion of defining native cultures according to stereotypes of the Other in the Western imaginary.[18] Further, Ada may defy her repressive husband and flout moral convention by having an affair, but her erotic activities tie her to Baines, a man who engaged in sexual blackmail to win her. The film's critiques, then, are quite vexed by gains and losses in the interplay of competing ideological imperatives.

Rather than reject these films for their contradictions, we might consider their 'messy' ideologies as lying at the core of their affective impact. By blurring clean ideological lines, they lure the viewer into an epistemological quest, a protracted attempt to clarify and resolve their contradictions. At a deeper level, though, their troubled ideologies appeal to a certain realpolitik of the female subject: they objectify the trauma and complexity of the acquisition of identity in circumstances of

17 Laura Mulvey and Colin MacCabe, 'Images of woman, images of sexuality', in Colin MacCabe (ed.), *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 79–104.

18 For example, Dyson, 'The return of the repressed?' and Leonie Pihama's 'Ebony and ivory: construction of the Maori in *The Piano*', in Harriet Margolis (ed.), *Jane Campion's The Piano* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 114–34, consider the film's problematic relation to colonialism and race in the context of contemporary New Zealand.

domination, demonstrating that this process does not result in a linear sweep of the old by the new. The process itself haunts the genealogy of identity formation represented in the films and in the female viewer's own experience, meaning that subjectivity is forever populated with visions of past selves and possibilities. The arresting images in the two Gothic melodramas offer particularly poignant crystallizations of this theme.

The successive close-ups of the demitasse in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* achieve some affective force from the counterpoint between the prostitute's quotidian 'pick-up' world in the cafe and the whispering narrator's philosophical tract on language and community. However, the moving quality of the arresting images in *Rebecca* and *The Piano* owes more to the portrayal of the slippage of identities across the personal histories of the central female characters. In *Rebecca*, all that remains of the nameless one's psychic torment is the dream of the 'desolate shell' of Manderley – burned out, deserted and recaptured by nature. In its decrepitude, the estate represents the final resting place for the unruly Rebecca's spirit and the threat of that past. Ada's encounter with self-annihilation is her soporific return to the deep, deep sea. As Manderley represents the site of our heroine's trials, its barren state also signals the death of that former searching, insecure identity. As the piano incarnates Western culture, its watery grave ends its ability to define the parameters of female expression and transgression (as it has acted as both Ada's voice and the alibi for her adulterous liaisons). Revisiting the destruction of the family estate or of the piano, the heroine appears to savour the moment when the burdensome past no longer has the power to regulate her choices. She is free and born anew.

However, the romantic representation of these images in the context of a dream suggests that this is only a partial explanation. Normally, such dreams would elicit the more alarmed response characteristic of nightmares, especially nightmares involving the dreamer's death, but the protagonists recount their visions with some nostalgia, even longing. The images' beauty and lyricism enhance the sense of pleasure in the return. The heroines appear, then, to desire that previous self, mired though it was in patriarchy, persecution and confusion – to yearn for that other scene even as it represents the extinction of personality. Following the logic of cultural domination to the end of the line, self-abnegation seems a seductive option. Hence, the past order persists at the level of desire even in the redeemed or reconstructed woman.

Yet another part of the appeal of these visions is that they archive an extreme version of female will. Like snapshots in family albums, the remembered images in both films preserve the narrative of confrontation between an obstreperous female and her dominators. Certainly, in contrast to *Rebecca*'s protagonist, much is made of Ada's will in *The Piano* and her ability to press her desires in the face of formidable opposition. In this sense, there is a kinship between Ada and Rebecca. Because Campion chooses to celebrate rather than demonize her, Ada is

a more acceptably progressive version of the independent and sexualized Rebecca.[19] Both, though, are madwomen in the ocean, women who, because they refuse to play their proper roles within patriarchy, are dramatically relegated to spaces outside of the community – whether permanently, as in Rebecca's watery grave, or temporarily, as in Ada's recurring fantasy.

These images thus map out the 'before and after' of female identity within systems of domination, embodying the contradictory aspects of this identity as it has been forged across time. In the context of films that are ideologically vexed, these arresting images enact a series of conflicting fantasies that alternately celebrate a victorious femininity, a self that signifies the end of the struggle for identity, and a battle of female will against the powers-that-be. The point is not that the films have it one way or the other. These arresting images achieve affective power because they thrust the contradictions to the surface and refuse to resolve them. In sustaining this tension, the images animate the clashes and anomalies that bedevil female subjectivity. This sense of anomaly is critical to the emotions conjured by the arresting image. Just as the vision of the submerged woman and piano is surreal in its odd and surprising juxtaposition of elements, the representation of female subjectivity, shaped by collisions between past and present, between oppressed and liberated versions of the self, is incongruous, uncomfortable and moving.

The Piano's final image simulates the struggles and emotions involved in the evolution of female identity, tapping into the female viewer's subjective vault. Here identification operates in the broadest sense. Rather than identify exclusively with a character or a situation, the viewer finds the allusions to the organization of experience compelling. As Robert Stam and Ella Shohat argue, the relationship between spectator and film is shaped by an analogical structure of feeling, a 'structuring of filmic identification across social, political, and cultural situations, through strongly perceived or dimly felt affinities of social perception or historical experience'. The viewer's recognition of a correspondence in experience between the cinematic and the personal forges an 'imaginative space of alliance', a topic to which I shall shortly return.[20]

The connections I have traced thus far between *The Piano*, *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* and *Rebecca* lie generally within an accepted realm of intertextuality – a family of cinematic images. While these films are drawn from my own repertoire of cinematic encounters, autobiography also leads to a more explicitly private association. We have seen how characters' dreams and dreamlike landscapes inform arresting images. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that these cinematic elements might elicit a real dream as part of an associative web. When I was about ten years old, I began to have a recurring nightmare that seemed indebted to a viewing of *King Kong* on television (see figures 16 and 17). In the nightmare, I awoke with my heart pounding from a bad dream, only to see a large figure standing in the doorway. The figure

19 In *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1989), Robin Wood argues that *Rebecca*'s true heroine is the title character, because she so clearly reflects male anxieties about autonomous, adult femininity, while providing a powerful alternative to the 'good wife' story (p. 347).

20 Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, 'From the imperial family to the transnational imaginary: media spectatorship in the age of globalization', in Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (eds), *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 161.

Figures 16 and 17
Ann Darrow (Fay Wray) and King Kong atop the Empire State Building in a legendary finale. *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933).

turned out to be a big, hairy ape who then commenced to chase me all over the countryside. In a final attempt to escape, I leapt straight up into the air in a 'dream shot' framed much like a photograph or movie image. Within this frame, I could see my ankle and foot at the top and my pursuer's paw and arm reaching up from below. Just as it appeared that I would escape, the marker '101 feet' flashed on the top right of the frame, representing the height I had jumped (and perhaps the fact that I had recently seen *One Hundred and One Dalmations* [Disney, 1961]). At that moment, the ape grabbed my ankle and I realized that I was doomed. Shortly thereafter, I really woke up and realized, as one does, that it was just a dream, albeit a dream within a dream.

Although I wish I had something less transparent and more interesting to offer the Freudian canon, the dream's sexual imagery is textbook in all respects, not the least of which is the huge ape to represent the phallus. However, the connection with *The Piano*'s arresting image lies less in any distinct Freudian correspondences than in the way the visual geography and thematic resonance of the film's imagery echoes that of my nightmare. Just as Ada is bound to the piano by her ankle, so I was thus caught by the ape. Fear and the urge for self-preservation in the face of what appear to be overwhelming patriarchal forces also lend a certain symmetry to these dream images. Moreover, remembrance is central. The arresting images from *Rebecca* and *The Piano* occur through character reminiscences that trace an odyssey between past and present selves. Similarly, my nightmare can only appear as an association through a recollection that compares then and now.

Such connections are further fuelled by the strong presence of the elemental that courses through the associated films.[21] *The Piano*'s final scene achieves an impact not only because of aural and pictorial lyricism, but because it relies to a certain extent on primal imagery that, through the ripple effect, links to other visuals with a similar investment. The Gothic melodramas draw from imagery of water, fire and nature more generally, emphasizing how nature ultimately overtakes culture. In the first part of Campion's film, the high-angle shots of the piano on the coastline emphasize its tremendous vulnerability to the forces of the sea. In the epilogue, the piano, surrounded by plants and fish at ocean's bottom, has succumbed to these forces. Ada hovers above, with her billowing skirt giving her the appearance of an exotic underwater flower.

21 Dana Polan discusses *The Piano*'s primal and elemental imagery in more detail in *Jane Campion* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), pp. 30–3.

Articulating the opposition between nature and culture that the film has employed to critique colonialism and Victorian-era patriarchy, the image is thus thematized. *Rebecca*'s opening emphasizes how nature encroaches on the stately Manderley and its pathways, while presenting the sea as a central visual motif and fire as the only means of trumping the family demons, at least for a time. In turn, the 'Kong' dream is inspired by a film that features a literal return to the primaeval – the marshes, jungles and predatory inhabitants of a prehistoric world.

Ultimately, this elemental imagery fuels the affective impact of scenarios that play out the terrors of otherness within inhospitable foreign terrains. Like the other films, *King Kong* tells the story of displaced people, traversing unfamiliar and threatening terrains defined and dominated by patriarchal and/or colonial interests. The white film troupe surrounded by hostile 'natives' and dinosaurs introduces the collision-of-worlds theme so important to the film's narrative. However, it is Kong – the captured, giant 'black' ape trapped within a colonial setting as a spectacular attraction – that more dramatically conveys the poignant sense of alienation in cross-cultural circumstances. As *King Kong*, *The Piano*, *Two or Three Things* and *Rebecca* each stage the meeting of two or more worlds, the term 'cross-cultural' signifies not just the literal confrontation of different countries, but also of different genders, classes and races. Ideally, Kong should then join Ada, Juliette and the two Mrs de Winters as one of the culturally dispossessed. However, a white ten-year-old girl's nightmares cast him in the role of an overwhelming antagonist, embracing the colonialist narrative to amplify stereotypical notions of a hyper-masculine racialized threat. In my web of associations, the elemental imagery of arresting images underscores feminine anxieties in patriarchal environments, anxieties that can be articulated through ideologically aware, as well as unreconstructed or 'politically incorrect', subject positions.

The associations between this network of narratives – the Kong dream, the Cooper/Schoedsack, Hitchcock, Godard and Campion films – rely on an interplay of resonant, deeply rooted cultural materials to achieve their effects. Arresting images are at one and the same time *arrested* images. Regression – going back to a personal and cultural mother lode of images, discourses and experiences – is a fundamental dynamic in the reception of the captivating visual. Psychoanalytic film theory has amply addressed spectatorship's regressive aspects, particularly cinema's invocation of the mirror stage, one of the earliest psychic moments of childhood development.[22] The evolutionary nature of subjectivity also involves a less universal, more culturally specific and individual dimension. Acts of reading and viewing necessarily mobilize both past and present aspects of the viewer's personal experience – a continuum of subjectivity. The viewer is a storehouse of images as well as an embodiment of personal history that can be potentially activated during reception, shaping textual meaning. When we are particularly entranced by a film or an image, we experience a heightened instance of

22 In *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), Christian Metz provides a representative example of the literature in film studies on regression.

the visual media's ability to stimulate not only an aesthetic response, but a reaction generated from the archives that comprise individual subjectivities, a reaction that reaches back to our respective 'stone ages', dragging with it the clamoring voices of our various and changing historical selves.

The volatility of this combination of histories suggests that the digressive dynamic in reception need not end in a simple confirmation of established tastes and perspectives – a reoccupation of some regressive space, for example. The family of images created through digression does provide pleasure by endorsing visual and cultural patterns the viewer finds compelling. At the same time, this dialogue between images can result in the viewer's reflection on what she or he finds enjoyable and why. This reflection on one's own tastes is liable to be elicited especially by 'troubled' texts that do not adequately resolve their contradictions and, like all open wounds, require constant attention. In any case, tracking associations can lead to a questioning of one's own viewing preferences, helping to unmask the cultural and ideological dynamics that underpin even the simplest acts of taste.

Although they may be activated by similar textual elements, associative webs are idiosyncratic, varying from spectator to spectator. The chance nature of the association – its aleatory, whimsical and transitory character – would seem to relegate it to the backwaters of reception study. However, granting that associations are involuntary and heterogeneous, I have argued that their general structure of correspondences and cultural indebtedness demonstrates a certain systematic nature that belies their apparent lack of substance. Within specific instances of viewing, associations are characterized by a surprising degree of coherence. This coherence is suggestive for understanding the viewing process, especially as it provokes digression.

The Piano's final scene has provided an opportunity to tease out the latent logic behind one particular set of associations. The associations that occur between *The Piano*'s arresting image and those of other texts are created through a series of parallelisms – parallelisms that cover a broad territory from the visual to the cultural. In my viewing, these parallels have materialized as symmetries in voiceover narration, the rendering of time, the surreal transformation or juxtaposition of objects, and the presence of the elemental, supported by themes involving crises in female identity within the fantasy framework of the dream. Associative webs are built on such intricate correspondences. The time of viewing and our subsequent reflections about a text become a potential wonderland of associations.

Far from being unbounded, then, the associations that arise from the ripple effect are rooted in the viewer's cultural experience. In the case of associations between the arresting images of *The Piano*, *Rebecca*, *Two or Three Things*, *King Kong* and the Kong dream, the pattern of connections that emerges is drawn, at the very least, from my background

as a white, middle-class female subject, film academic and cinephile. The source of my fascination rests on a certain combination of aural and visual elements within the context of a particular structuring of female experience that focuses on momentous shifts in identity and self-recognition. Such narratives pair the beauties of surreal and elemental imagery with the seductive appeal of the feminist or quasi-feminist *Bildungsroman*. They thus act to aestheticize the standard mass cultural fantasy of the female subject's maturing and redemption, found in various forms designed for consumption by women from Harlequin romances and Gothic melodramas to chick flicks. The art or hybrid film provides a series of twists to the raw therapeutic dimension of such sagas, lending particular cinematic expressiveness and narrative ambiguity to the fantasy. The female viewer can thus have it both ways: she can savour the retelling of a familiar woman's story while finding pleasure in the aesthetic complexity that dramatically renovates the retold tale.

Hence, while particulars between spectators surely vary, *The Piano* invites personalization – a prime characteristic of cult relationships to film[23] – through its graphic reenactment of a drama of female identity that has the potential to intersect in heterogeneous ways with viewers' experiences. In general, the arresting image's affective dimensions arise from its ability to radiate outward toward other texts that amplify, negotiate or play with templates of experience. When viewers digress during viewing, they activate different aesthetic and experiential registers that, in turn, begin to reveal the sometimes unexpected cultural forces at work during reception.

23 Umberto Eco, 'Casablanca: cult movies and intertextual collage', trans. William Weaver, in *Travels in Hyperreality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1990), p. 198.

The art film's arresting image thus foregrounds a routine aspect of spectatorship – the occurrence of digression through a chain reaction of associations. Substantially fuelled by a collusion between autobiography and film, the ripple effect becomes law in any textual encounter. The fact that intricate correspondences thrive in what appears to be an inattentive reaction – the mind wandering from the text itself – sheds light on how texts are experienced. Our appreciation and emotional response derive not only from textual manipulations of formal and narrative elements, but from confluences of aural and visual elements that cross textual boundaries through the ripple effect. Neither interpretation nor affect results simply from the realization of textual strategies; the way those strategies fuse with the viewer's catalogue of experience excites intertextual associations that inform assessment and pleasure. In this sense, all texts are immoderately open – none are particularly privileged in being able to control the shape and destiny of their meaning. However, to acknowledge this, personal responses, as they are inscribed within cultural pressures, must enter the interpretive mix, including affective responses that stray from the precincts of the text.

That said, we must recognize that there is no way to comprehend fully how the personal interacts with a text. Each individual, as Gramsci notes, is 'the product of the historical process to date which has deposited in [that individual] an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory'.

A study that modestly attempts to approach the inventory must concern itself with the interplay between public and private discourses in the constitution of specific responses, regarding the personal as a 'strangely composite construction, resembling a kind of geology, the selective sedimentation of past traces'.[24] Granting the impossibility of drawing up a total inventory of traces that could explain the myriad digressions that take place during reception, we can still track some of the dominant elements that course through these digressions, particularly as they provide insight into how templates inflected by social identities figure into reception. Even a partial exploration of the associative process reveals dynamics of meaning-making and affect that go precipitously over the edge of the text into cultural waters that are as unpredictable as they are worthy of charting.

24 Popular Memory Group, 'Popular memory: theory, politics, method', in Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz and David Sutton (eds), *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 211.